

Practical Tips:

Preparing for the Holidays

The holiday season can be a joyous time. The gathering of families, the special meals, the celebration of culture, the sense of expectation, the solemn observance of shared history, and the hope for the future—all are special blessings that many people look forward to each year. These festivities also bring a number of challenges, however, particularly for children who stutter. Busy schedules lead to intensified time pressures; family dinners involve greater speaking demands; and large groups of people yield heightened communication pressures. As a result, children can experience increased stuttering during the holidays, for environmental stressors can affect the amount and severity of stuttering a child exhibits. Fortunately, as speech-language pathologists, we can help parents, teachers, and others support children who stutter during the holidays, so their concerns about speech are not exacerbated by all the excitement and activity.

Enjoy the anticipation, but be aware of the “build-up.”

One of the joys of being a parent is watching the wonder in our children’s eyes as they prepare for the holidays. Sometimes, though, we get too caught up in building their excitement, with comments such as, “Aren’t you excited? The big day is just 3½ weeks away! We are going to be so busy!” It can be helpful to remember that some children have more difficulty talking when they are worked up or experience time pressure; we can help them speak more easily by modulating our own enthusiasm. Of course, we want our children to be able to be excited about coming events, but if your student is affected by the frenzy, then you can help parents learn to share the fun without becoming overly sensational. They can show the child how to be happy and enthusiastic without escalating the excitement more than necessary.

Enjoy some quiet time.

As the holidays approach, many people work to find a balance between preparing for big events and spending special time with family. Children who stutter may gain particular value from time that does not have to be spent talking with others or facing anxieties about speaking situations. When the chaos of the season seems like it’s taking over, parents can strive to take some down time...simple one-on-one (or family group) time that is interactive but does not require a high amount of talking. Coloring and doing art projects, reading together (even reading silently), working on puzzles, playing simple turn-taking games, and just “hanging out” can all help children establish a calmer base that helps them face the tougher situations that occur during this very social season. Sometimes, all it takes is a gentle reminder that they don’t have to fill every minute with excitement and turmoil. Of course, parents benefit from this time, too!

Remember that it’s okay to stutter.

Another special aspect of the holidays season is the opportunity to visit with cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents and others we do not see as often during the rest of the year. Spending time with less familiar people—even if they are our own family members—can put a unique stress on children who stutter. Sometimes, people will ask, innocently or otherwise, why a child is “still stuttering” or if he’s “gotten therapy yet” to “fix that stutter.” Remember that other people probably do not understand stuttering, but such comments can be hurtful for a child who already feels uncertain about his speech. These family gatherings provide a beneficial opportunity to educate others about speaking and stuttering. You can help parents learn how to enlighten others by acknowledging stuttering in a simple, matter-of-fact, and honest way, perhaps saying, “Yes, of course Johnny still stutters. It’s just part of how he speaks and nothing for him to hide or be ashamed of.” Or, “Yes, he’s in speech therapy—and through therapy, he has learned to speak more freely. Now, he says exactly what he wants to say rather than avoiding talking and being afraid of what others might say about him.” Such messages highlight the true nature of stuttering, provide a mild admonition for insensitive comments, and show the child that we support him and value what he says, regardless of whether he says it fluently or with stuttering.

By working with parents, teachers, and students, we can help to prepare everyone for a happy holiday season in which we balance increased communication demands with the reminder that it’s okay to stutter, even during the holidays!